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STRATEGIC VISIONING: WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT'S DONE

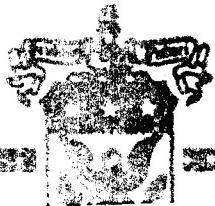
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STRATEGIC VISIONING: WHAT IT IS AND HOW IT'S DONE

AN INDIVIDUAL STUDY PROJECT

by

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ABSTRACT

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This paper addresses the issue of strategic visioning as both a concept and a process in the context of military leadership. In addition to providing a simple definition of strategic vision, the author presents a comprehensive description of the concept including its relationship to such things as alternative futures research, the Army's long range planning systems, and military leadership doctrine. Military leaders may develop strategic visions through a methodical application of the military problem solving process, effective staff work, and specific "value added" inputs by the commander. The strategic leader skills and performance objectives outlined in DA PAM 600-80, Executive Leadership, provide the major steps in the visioning process. Of specific interest are the leadership competencies at the 4 star level which may be necessary to do effective strategic visioning. These competencies are generally viewed as learnable rather than innately fixed by genetic background. This paper's conclusions are based on readings in organization theory, business management, futurology, and current Army doctrine. Practitioners of long range planning in the Army infrastructure provide valuable insights into the nature of military strategic visioning. The author intends this paper as a primer for the average war college student who, like the author, has heretofore had little reason to intellectually venture forth into the uncharted waters of the future beyond the next NTC rotation or annual training plan.

INTRODUCTION

"Where there is no vision, the people perish."

-Proverbs XXIX, 18

"Key to all that must be accomplished is a vision."

-FM 22-103

Vision is "the inner light"

-Karl Von Clausewitz

Easy for you to say! ... but what exactly is this thing called vision? Having it seems absolutely essential to leadership greatness. Few would argue the visionary prowess of General George Washington in foreseeing that he could fight a protracted war of attrition against the British and win by not losing. Likewise, General George Marshall clearly demonstrated special visionary ability in winning the peace after World War II with the Marshall Plan in Europe. In fact, vision appears to be a critical attribute essential for entry into the ranks of strategic leader elite of military history. But what exactly is the make-up of this construct called vision? Furthermore, what specifications are added when the modifier "strategic" is applied to the concept of vision? How does futurology or alternative futures research apply to it? As one war college student aptly put it, "I may not be able to define strategic vision, but I'd recognize one when I saw it!" Even our incumbent President evidences this same confusion in his contemptuous attitude toward "the vision thing".¹

Thus, strategic visioning is a popular concept whose precise definition seems to be both murky and elusive. It is the objective of this paper to make some sense out of this confusion.

Resource materials used as a basis for the conclusions that follow come from many diverse sources. They include readings in organization theory and business management. Also very useful were inputs from the field of futurology and interviews with field grade officers from the domain of army long range planning such as the architects of The Army Long Range Planning Guidance, Army 21, and AirLand Battle Future. These sources gave valuable insights into the actual mechanics of developing visions for the Army's doctrine, equipment, and structure in the future. Finally, current Army doctrine, regulations, and professional periodicals provided a wealth of information about how we plan institutionally for the future and the role of executive level leaders therein.

The intent of this paper is to synthesize, from these diverse sources, both a definition of the strategic vision concept and a simplified model for creating one. The strategic or executive level leader's role in this process is of special interest. The examination of ways in which leaders may "add value" to the process of strategic visioning will support conclusions regarding the extent to which this ability is trainable or learnable (rather than being a talent fixed by genetic background). To be sure,

this effort risks oversimplification but hopefully will be useful in stimulating thought and better understanding regarding this very professionally relevant and vital concept. This paper is designed for the average war college student who, like the author, has heretofore had little reason to intellectually venture forth into the uncharted waters of the future beyond the next NTC rotation or annual training plan.

Specifically, the purposes of this paper are to (1) offer a definition and an amplifying description of the strategic vision concept as it applies to military leadership, (2) provide a model of a process by which strategic military leaders may go about creating visions, and (3) describe the specific leadership competencies at the 4 star level which may be necessary to do effective strategic visioning.

STRATEGIC VISION: A DEFINITION

Simply stated, the vision is the military leader's mental picture of the desired characteristics of the organization he or she commands at some point in the future. In essence, it is a desired future state.² The commander's intent for the outcome of an imminent battle or philosophy of command are examples of visions with which most war college students have common experience. Strategic visions differ from these in that they are created by the executive or strategic (four star) level leader. To the Army's Chief of

Staff(CSA), the vision applies to what he thinks the Army ought to look like at some point many years into the future. By regulation, the CSA articulates this 20 year vision biennially in the Army Long Range Planning Guidance.³ For a warfighting CINC, the strategic vision might be the general concept of the organizational structure and capabilities he'll require to achieve national interests in a regional area of responsibility within some probable future environment. It follows then that strategic vision can be defined as the executive level or four star military leader's view of the desired future characteristics of his/her organization within some distant and likely political, social, technological, environmental, and military context. The diagram at figure 1 further illustrates the concept of strategic vision in military leadership.

The strategic leader can assess the 1991 environment and the state of the organization within it in a fairly objective and reliable manner. However, seeing tomorrow is a significantly less precise process. Looking into the future, there are an infinite number of potential future world environments that will be determined mostly by current major trends and their interactions. Furthermore, some of these future environments are more likely than others. The strategic leader's challenge is to design the characteristics and capabilities that his organization must have to effectively accomplish all required missions in many

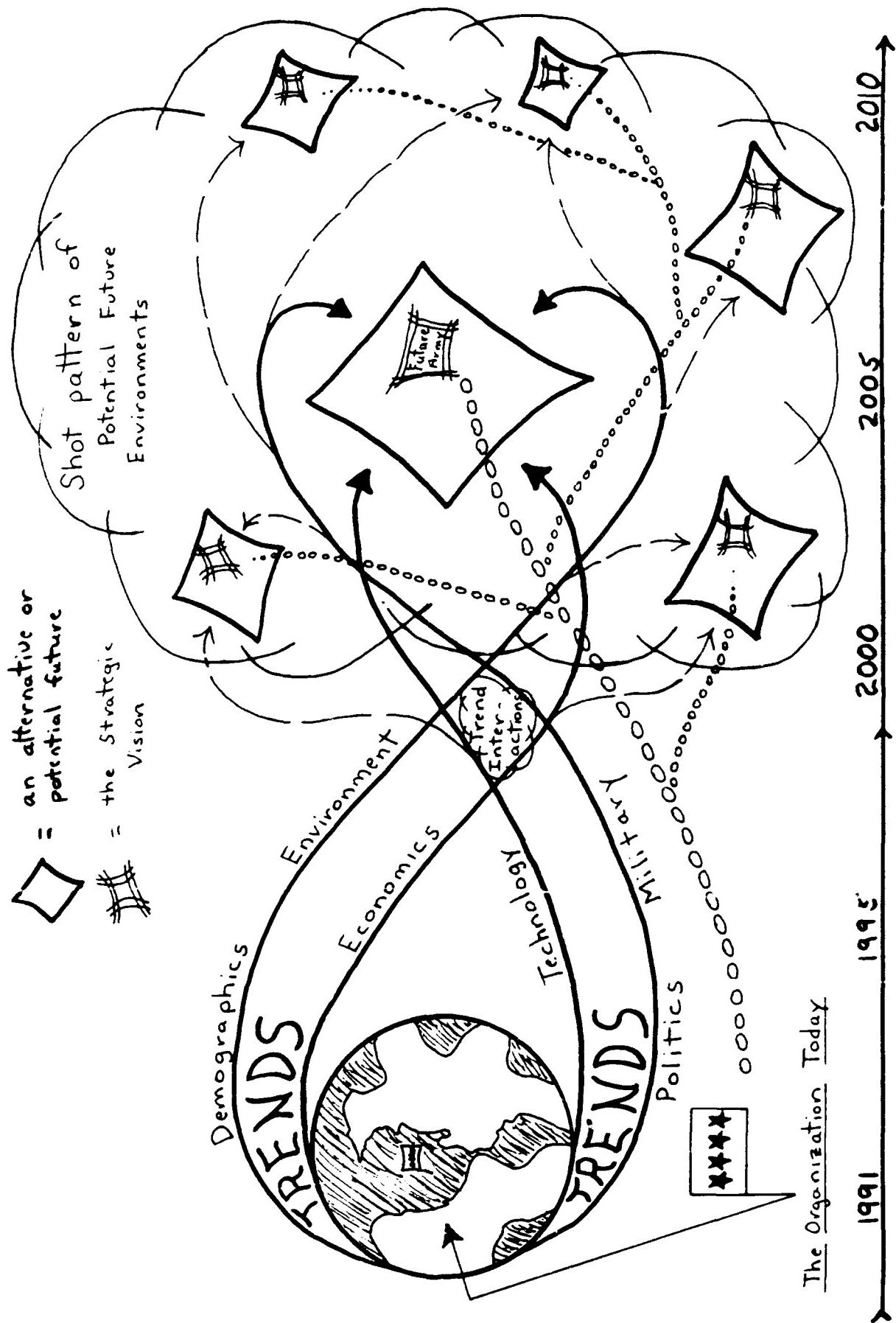


Figure 1. The Strategic Vision Concept

alternative futures. This becomes his vision, the desired future for his organization within many possible future contexts. So, which future should one plan for?

ROLE OF FUTUROLOGY. Futurologists, both intuitive and empirical types, provide very rich and unconstrained views of what future worlds might look like. Through trend analysis, extrapolation, and other exotic methodologies, they generate plausible and diverse descriptions of what the world will be like in the year 2000 and beyond⁴. While these future scenarios are logically bounded by relevant major trends, they are seldom advertised as predictions of what will actually come to pass. This would obviously be folly as there are simply too many variables involved. Rather, alternative futures are offered as potentials intended to stimulate thought and action now to help shape and nuture the positive trends and change or avert the adverse consequences of negative ones.⁵ Taken all together, a shot pattern of most likely futures will emerge which should facilitate rational and effective planning for what lies ahead. Futurologists thereby provide very valuable information regarding future contexts upon which strategic leaders may base their visions.

The strategic leader, having considered many alternative future environments, is faced with several significant challenges. He must produce a vision for his organization which will maximize the organization's success within the shot pattern of most probable future contexts and,

simultaneously, hedge against negative potential future scenarios.⁶ The robust nature of the vision is a critical characteristic which not only causes it to be effective in the most probable futures but also makes it a winner in other less desirable or likely futures. Thus, the ethereal business of futurologists, the Tofflers and the Kanns, has very real utility for the architects of the Army's future. It is therefore not surprising that the role of civilian futurologists is institutionalized in the Army Long-Range Planning System, AR 11-32, and that futurologists are frequently consulted by the proponents of Army future related documents such as Army 21, AirLand Battle Future, and TRADOC's Concept Based Requirements System (CBRS).⁷

VISIONING: HOW FAR OUT? How many years ahead ought the strategic vision be focused? The logical answer is far enough to be able to influence the critical factors which will shape the achievement of the vision. The 10-20 year timeframe seems like a good rule of thumb. 10 years is a reasonable strategic lower limit as it fits the usual research and development timelines associated with the CBRS process.⁸ On the other end, 20 years is not too far away to defy all confidence that trends and alternative futures will bear any reasonable similarity to the reality that eventually transpires at that distant time horizon. This confidence issue may account for the apparent lack of interest in the Army 21 concept, the 30 year vision for the Army on the battlefield of the future.⁹

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE VISIONS. What makes some visions better than others? While strategic visions come in many forms, it's reasonable to assume that most effective ones have much in common with the characteristics illustrated in figure 1. However, there appears to be a subjective element which may separate ordinary visions from those that truly set the course of the organization for the best possible future. What made the Marshall Plan or John Kennedy's intent to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade of the 60s such provocative visions? The Marshall Plan shaped the economic resurrection of Western Europe after WWII and in many ways contributed to our recent victory in the Cold War. Similarly, President Kennedy's statement focused effort on national technological superiority which is carried on by the current SDI program, a critical element of our global super power status. Not only did these men think up great visions, they articulated them in ways so powerful as to change the course of history. The best of strategic visions then...

"Contain images... that are charismatic enough to create excitement and commitment."¹⁰

-Herman Kahn

"Are beacons"¹¹

-Tom Peters

are "... simple, easily understood, clearly desireable, and energizing."

"feels right ... appeals at the gut... resonates with the listener's own emotional needs, it somehow clicks."¹²

-Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus

Thus, great strategic visions are robust, relevant, logical, etc. and often possess a certain "sex appeal" that makes them memorable and innately stimulating. Beyond being right, they are packaged in a manner which generates unity of effort throughout the organization to achieve the vision.

In summary, strategic visions may be described by the following characteristics:

- They apply to organizations that executive level, 4 star leaders command.
- They describe the desired future characteristics and capabilities of the organization.
- They are normally focused 10-20 years ahead.
- They are imbedded in many potential future global environments which are bounded by trends and their interactions.
- They are specifically designed to maximize organizational success within the shot pattern of the most likely future contexts but are sufficiently robust to avert especially negative future potentials or at least mitigate their effects.
- They stimulate organizational decisions and actions now that both implement the vision and help shape the future environment to make it more friendly to the vision.
- The best ones are uniquely attractive and energizing.

THE VISIONING PROCESS

No doubt there have been many great visions developed by sudden insight while standing in the shower or some other serendipitous method and then implemented by sheer brute force. As Tom Peters describes getting vision, there is "no precise path", "discovery is personal" and likely to be "messy".¹³ However, there would seem to be little utility in viewing the strategic visioning process as some sort of eccentric art form. Rather, this paper will suggest that visioning can be seen as a logical sequence of steps that may be executed by the leader and staff to systematically produce high quality visions.

The process of creating a strategic vision diagrammed at figure 2 is made up of two basic components. First is the problem solving process which logically develops the content of the vision itself. The second and equally important part contains the actions required to make the vision a reality... to make it happen. Taken together these two steps form a simple model that an executive leader might use to develop and achieve a strategic vision. In general, this model is a synthesis of the classic military problem solving methodology, like that used in standard Army troop leading procedure, and the strategic leader skills and performance objectives outlined in DA PAM 600-80, Executive Leadership. Walking a warfighting CINC through the process of developing and implementing a strategic vision for his regional area of responsibility might look as follows:

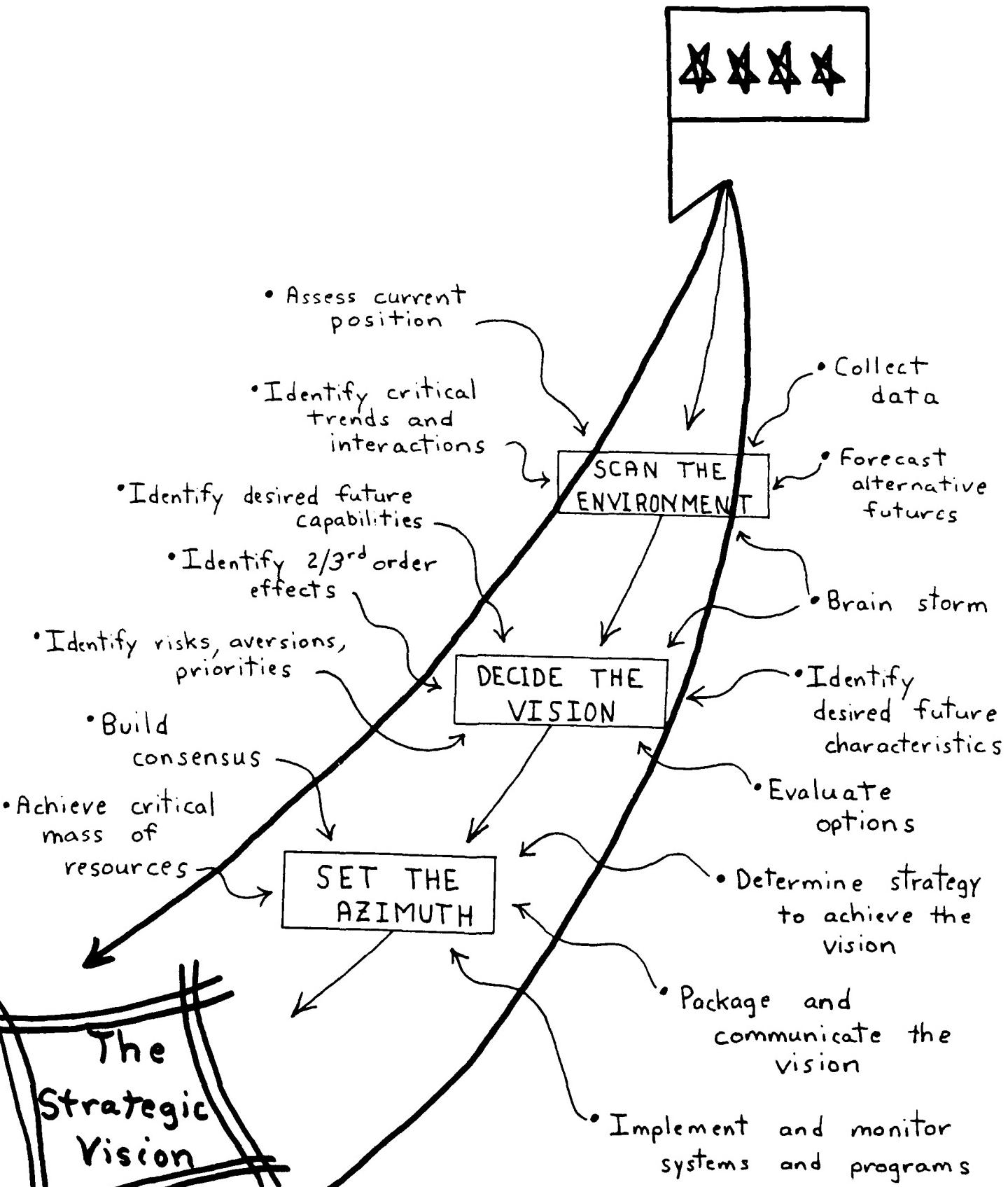


Figure 2. A Strategic Visioning Process

SCAN ENVIRONMENT. Before deciding anything, it is necessary to do some massive information collection on the myriad critical factors which have important impact on the command. Starting with missions specified by the NCA, the CINC would logically need detailed understanding of theater campaign, multi-national and country plans. Also, an understanding of regional history, ethnic and religious factors, political disputes, etc. would be vitally important. Assessment of the threats to regional stability, local military capabilities, and the impact of global trends: economic, social, environmental, etc. would be essential. The projection of all of these factors into the future contexts to which the structure and capabilities of the command must apply would be crucial to the environmental scanning effort. In this phase the CINC should be in the listening and learning mode. His staff, regional experts, key political leaders, state department personnel, etc. provide the information necessary to form the logic base for the vision. Effective visioning starts with a comprehensive, quality "read" of the external environment.¹⁴

DECIDE THE VISION. Having digested a huge amount of information, the strategic leader is now ready to sort out the really important issues and determine the precise contents of the strategic vision. Having drawn some conclusions about the shot pattern of likely future conditions 10-20 years out, the CINC must identify the gaps between the future threat and the projected future

capabilities of the command. Strategic options must either fill the gaps or identify the risks associated with intentional shortfalls between threat contingencies and projected military capabilities. Anticipation of the second and third order effects of various options 10 or more years into the future requires enormously complex and detailed thinking. This phase eventually boils down to comparison of options against specific military and political criteria. The result should be a comprehensive package of organizational characteristics and capabilities which offers the best possible hope of mission success in the world 10-20 years ahead. It amounts to a commitment by the CINC to make his successors, not himself, famous.

SET AZIMUTH. A mediocre plan which is well understood by subordinates will usually win over a great plan not as well understood. In similar fashion, the implementation component of the visioning process is clearly of greater importance relative to the scanning and deciding steps. The CINC must sell his vision to the NCA, the JCS, his own staff and subordinate commanders. All must be convinced of the rightness of the vision and their personal stakes in it. The assurance of enduring commitment is vital to generating the funding of structure, equipment, and personnel to resource the vision over time. Furthermore, in order to keep the vision going after the CINC's departure from the scene, the elements of the vision must be imbedded in the institutions of the command.¹⁵ Regulations, SOPs, plans,

and other permanent guides for action should all be aligned to support the visionary strategy. Obviously the CINC's personal magnetism and ability to communicate and influence are critical to the process of gaining personal commitments and resource decisions. It follows that the ability of the CINC to frame his vision in a memorable and motivating style supplies the impetus to make the vision happen.¹⁶

STRATEGIC VISIONING COMPETENCIES

Any attempt to precisely define all the characteristics which facilitate strategic visioning by executive level leaders is bound to be subjective and incomplete. Nevertheless, the following list of BE-KNOW-DO attributes seems to flow logically from the previously described models of the visioning concept and process. Strategic visionaries should:

- BE**
 - Open minded, unconstrained by convention.
 - Logical.
 - Effective communicators with all sorts of media.
 - Broadly experienced.
 - Smart enough to synthesize diverse concepts into a coherent and whole vision.
- KNOW**
 - History.
 - People.
 - The DOD, JCS, Army long range planning systems.
 - A good idea when he sees one.
 - The visions of higher authorities.

- DQ - Listen to even the most outrageous and radical ideas.
- Nurture the strange people tha have these ideas.¹⁷
- Build consensus.
- Sell the vision.

Looking at the process of visioning previously discussed, it is readily apparent that not all required functions in creating a vision are necessarily performed personally by the strategic leader. In fact, the visioning process is probably a function vested in all of the organization's leaders, not just the guy at the top. With this in mind, it would seem to be constructive to attempt to determine how the strategic leader "adds value" to the process of developing and implementing a vision. In other words, what specific contributions to visioning are unique to the strategic leader, i.e. functions that only the executive leader can adequately accomplish because they are beyond the competence of subordinates. On the short list proposed here includes perspective, power, genius, and championship.

PERSPECTIVE. The strategic leader has a unique perspective of his organization and the environment. Furthermore this comprehensive view is not totally available to any other member of the organization, even the most trusted second in command. Using the analogy of the organization to a mountain that the strategic leader sits atop, the position at the absolute peak of the mountain is the only vantage point providing a 100% view of all external

directions and all of the mountain itself. Even the most brilliant and trusted subordinate is figuratively on the side of the mountain in some respects and thereby prevented from seeing both the world and the part of the mountain on the opposite side. For example, only the warfighting CINC is exposed to the personal and direct guidance from the NCA, CSA, or local ambassador. Because of his unique perspective, the CINC alone has access to all the information required to formulate a viable vision.

POWER. The strategic leader is clearly the most powerful actor in the organization. He typically has a "command" relationship with all other members of the organization. By virtue of the power vested in his duty position, he is best able to influence the actions of other leaders and other organizations who will necessarily influence the implementation of the vision. Therefore, the strategic leader alone has the power to assemble resources in critical mass and institutionalize the vision. The CINC himself is most capable of achieving the support of the NCA, CSA, and Congress to fund the structure, personnel, and equipment required to support the vision. Within the organization, he has the power to command the changes to programs, regulations, and SOPs which will carry on the vision even after he is gone from the organization.

GENIUS. There is no doubt that the very best of visions are usually simple, intrinsically energizing, and

memorable. They also result in very successful organizational performance in the long term. While most other aspects of visioning can be progressively developed in any leader, the genius aspect may to require more art than science.¹⁸ There may be some sort of innate ability, an intuitive or creative talent, required to synthesize a winning whole vision out the complex conglomeration of trends, forces, and contexts that may exist some 10-20 years into the future. Alternatively, this special ability to synthesize may simply depend on one's intellectual capacity to solve exceptionally complex problems. Along this line, both a reasonably high level of intelligence and the ability to think logically and flexibly are essential to visionary genius. "VUCA capable" may also be a strategic leadership competency that is closely related to the genius concept.¹⁹ In any case, it may have been this genius which allowed Lee Iacocca to see quality as the key to Ford Motor Company's future or Steve Jobs at Apple to envision a personal computer on every desk in America or John Kennedy to see a man on the moon.

CHAMPIONSHIP. Successful visions have in common a strategic leader whose personal involvement in the implementation of the vision causes him to become synonymous with it. The strategic leader must be the champion of the vision in every venue.²⁰ He talks the vision in every speech, makes every decision within the vision's context, and becomes himself a symbol of the vision. If strong and

tough are elements of a military vision, it would make sense that the strategic military leader would himself look fit, talk about fitness, and work out regularly and visibly. Many CEOs have taken to doing their own TV commercials for the purpose of personally championing their visions.²¹ This sort of championship is critical to mobilizing the commitment inside and outside the organization required to achieve the vision.

CONCLUSION

Even as the current faddish interest in the strategic vision is wearing out, the role of this concept, by whatever name, remains of universal importance to organizational success. Given the acceleration of the pace of change, the burgeoning complexity of the world environment, the geometric improvements in information management, and the dramatic decline in time-distance factors, strategic leaders are increasingly challenged to stay within the decision cycles of the opposition. Military organizations that will be winners in this super competitive world will have leaders who effectively focus organizational effort to achieve the strategic vision, the commander's intent in the long term. In a way, an effective vision serves as a mission-type order for the organization which unleashes the creative, enthusiastic, and unified efforts of members in pursuit of a common and clearly understood goal. Vision will certainly remain a vital component of effective leadership.

As previously described in this paper, the process of creating a strategic vision need not be done by magic. Rather, a predominantly routine application of the military problem solving process is likely to yield a high quality solution to the questions of what the organization ought to look like and be able to do at a point 10 to 20 years in the future. Even more significant is the idea that the vast majority of strategic leader competencies needed for effective visioning can be improved over time through study, practice and experience. They are not innately predetermined or fixed in degree. If it is the duty of the military professional to prepare personally for the challenges of higher command, the development of a thorough understanding of strategic visioning and a commitment to developing the associated professional competencies would seem to be moral imperatives. It follows that the study of strategic vision should be an important part of the leadership development curriculum in military schooling starting at the Command and General Staff College level and continuing through the Senior Service Colleges.

The intent of this paper has been to clarify and de-mystify both the content and process of strategic visioning. This is a primer rather than an advanced text. The definitions and models represent an opinion based primarily on literature search rather than empirical evidence. This is a start point for understanding some very complex concepts. No doubt, there is much more to be

earned and written about strategic visioning. Nevertheless it is hoped that this paper will stimulate thought and interest about an issue of considerable professional relevance to military leaders.

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